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ABSTRACT

Contemporary changes in the social roles of women are associated with the fact that women beyond the traditional student age are returning to college in increasing numbers. Older women students form a large minority group on many campuses today. A review of the literature suggests that these women students may experience special problems in returning to student life and may have needs for special preventative or developmental outreach programming to facilitate their educational careers. A questionnaire survey designed to assess such needs was conducted among women aged 21-57 who were enrolled at Colorado State University in spring 1974. Results indicate that highest priority needs are for convenient day care for preschool children, orientation at initial reentry to campus, social skill training, social contact with peers, assistance in vocational choice, vocational preparation, and job-search. (Author)

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THE RETURNING WOMAN STUDENT: Needs of an Important Minority Group on College Campuses

By

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Abstract

Contemporary changes in the social roles of women are associated with the fact that women beyond the traditional student age are returning to college in increasing numbers. Older women students form a large minority group on many campuses today. A review of the literature suggests that these women students may experience special problems in returning to student life and may have needs for special preventative or developmental outreach programming to facilitate their educational careers. A questionnaire survey designed to assess such needs was conducted among women aged 21-57 who were enrolled at Colorado State University in Spring, 1974. Results indicate that highest priority needs are for convenient day care for pre-school children, orientation at initial re-entry to campus, social skill training, social contact with peers, assistance in vocational choice, vocational preparation, and job-search.

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The cover depicts man's striving toward unity of personality, represented by the magic circle, or mandala.

THE RETURNING WOMAN STUDENT:

Needs of an Important Minority Group on College Campuses

Contemporary social and technological changes altering the role of women in our society have had an impact on college and university enrollments. First, the Women's Rights Movement has given today's women a new consciousness of their own self-development as persons. Women increasingly desire to become more independent or self-supporting through the kinds of higher status employment usually achieved only after completion of some higher education. There is a direct relationship between educational attainment and labor force participation for women; the higher the educational level attained, the more likely they are to be engaged in paid employment, especially among contemporary women of middle age (U.S. Department of Labor, 1969).

Secondly, the idea that career development is a life-long process, that education and vocational changes may be made at almost any stage of life, has now both popular and theoretical (Super, 1953) support.

Also, technological changes have resulted in smaller families, less time-consuming domestic work, and a longer life-span. These facts contribute to the discontinuities of the modern woman's life, when compared to lives of men. Most married women now live one-third of their lives after the youngest child is married (LaFollette, 1956). Women feel the need to be productive and creative people during this prolonged adult life when their children are no longer dependent and their husbands are involved in a well-established career pattern (Schade, 1973). Because of the past fluctuation in birth rates and the present low birth rates, increasingly greater numbers of women in their middle years of life may be expected to seek employment or further education in the near future.

The typical pattern of feminine educational-career development has been one of stages and shifting roles. On the average, a young woman attends school or is employed until she is 18-21 years old when she typically gets married. She usually then shifts to a domestic role in the service of her family until her youngest

child, born by the time she is 30 years old, has few dependency needs. This is, once again, a period of transition and redefinition (Harbeson, 1967; Sharma, 1974). Brandenburg (1974) notes that "middle motherhood," typically the years between 35-40, is a critical period for women, a time of identity crisis and a second chance for career exploration.

For these women, education is often seen as a route to self-development, to paid employment, and to making a contribution to society commensurate with their personal potential. For other women, marital separation and divorce have been the propelling forces sending them back to the labor market and back to school to prepare for vocations.

Sharma (1974) writes that women in their thirties and forties are returning to school in large numbers. An informal survey of registrars at several colleges and universities by the present authors (personal communications, Spring, 1974) supports her statement. The percentage of women students beyond the traditional student age at Oregon State University is 6.2; at the University of Arizona, 6.34; Eastern New Mexico University, 6.7; Florida State University, 7.4; California State University at Chico, 7.5; University of Wyoming, 8.5; Indiana State University, 9.9; North Texas State College, 13.2; University of Washington, 13.5. The average percentage of mature women in the total student population for these nine colleges and universities is 8.89 percent. Thus, older women comprise a large minority group on many campuses today.

The returning woman student may be viewed as a "minority" on the college campus in that she may be personally and institutionally handicapped as a student. Most college programs are designed for young people, a design which suits the male pattern of educational-career development, since men rarely return to college during their middle years, unless the return is job-related and financed by their employers.

When women decide to return to school, they frequently experience special problems which should be of concern to all members of the educational community, faculty, counselors, and student personnel administrators; need for financial aid, institutional barriers to entrance and success, difficulties in managing their traditional domestic roles as they shape new social roles, and personality problems, especially the lack of a positive self-concept (Feldman, 1973; Ginsberg, 1966; Hiltunen, 1968; U. S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 1971). In many institutions, the returning woman student is handicapped by loss of undergraduate credits earned too long ago, scheduling of classes at times which conflict with family responsibilities, and age limits on many graduate and professional programs (Richter and Whipple, 1972). However, studies reveal that these mature students, due to their higher motivation, generally are academically more successful than younger students and are more likely to make immediate use of their training (Lewis, 1968).

The present study reports a survey conducted at Colorado State University among older women students in the Spring of 1974. The survey was designed, in accordance with the Moore and Delworth (1972) program developmental model, to assess the needs in this special student population for outreach programs to facilitate their educational development.

Procedure

At Colorado State University, registration records revealed that 628 women aged 21-57 were enrolled. The average age of this student group was 29.4 years. In addition, the Continuing Education program at this University, principally a night school for community residents not regularly enrolled, included more than 600 registrants, most of whom were older women students. All regularly enrolled students in this target population and a sample of 332 of the Continuing Education students were surveyed through a mailed questionnaire to determine their needs and interests, to learn how the University could help them make optimal use of their

educational opportunity, and to gather information about their personal reactions to their experiences as university students. A cover letter explained the purpose of the interest-opinion survey, stating that it was addressed to "women students, ranging in age from 21 to 62 and over, who may perceive themselves as rather different from the traditional C.S.U. student because of different life experiences (such as age, marital status, work history,)" and "who are attending college for the first time or are returning to interrupted studies after spending some time in other social roles." Students receiving the questionnaire who did not fit this description were asked to excuse the inconvenience and to ignore the questionnaire. Those to whom the description applied were requested to complete the survey form and return it to the Office of Women's Programs, which sponsored this research project, in an enclosed, pre-addressed, stamped envelope.

The survey form had two parts. The first part was a structured set of items, consisting of a series of fifteen possible developmental-preventative outreach programs thought to meet potential needs of the target population. Students were instructed to check "Yes" or "No" columns to indicate their personal reactions to the implementation of this series of programs. The potential offerings fell into three general categories: academic-vocational skill development, designed as a brush-up for women whose study skills may have become rusty; vocational, academic, and personal counseling; and special workshops or new programs and facilities available on the campus particularly to serve returning women students. The second part consisted of an open-ended request to comment on their experiences as students and to suggest other services or activities which would make the transition into student life easier and pleasanter for mature women students.

Results

Approximately 30 percent, or 301, of the 960 questionnaires mailed to women students aged 21 and older were completed and returned.

The results of the first part of the survey questionnaire are reported in three tables. Table I presents responses to suggested academic-vocational skill building programs, listed in ranked order of endorsement. Thus, the first-ranking type of program was Job Applications and Resume-Writing Workshop, which was endorsed by 198 of the respondents, comprising 66 percent of the total number of students who responded. The other four study skills workshops were favored by approximately half of the respondents with the other half either definitely negative or apathetic, if making no response at all may be interpreted as lack of interest.

Table I

Interest of Returning Women Students in Academic or Vocational Skill-Building Workshops

Type of Workshop	Yes		No		No Response		Rank
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	
Job Applications and Resume-Writing Skills	198	.66	19	.06	84	.28	1
Reading and Note-taking Study Skills	161	.54	32	.11	108	.36	2
Paper Writing Skills	158	.53	35	.12	108	.36	3
Math/Science Study Skills	153	.51	37	.12	111	.37	4
Tutoring/Learning Laboratory	147	.49	38	.13	116	.39	5

Responses to three types of counseling services are presented in Table 2. Individual counseling, presumably for personal problems, ranked highest with an 88

percent endorsement rate. Vocational counseling ranked second with 70 percent favorable, and academic counseling was third with 63 percent favoring.

Table 2

Need for Counseling Services

Type of Counseling	Yes		No		No Response		Rank
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	
Individual Counseling	263	.88	16	.05	22	.07	1
Vocational-Career Counseling	211	.70	22	.07	68	.23	2
Academic Counseling	192	.63	32	.11	77	.26	3

Interest in a variety of programs, including new facilities, activities and courses is recorded in Table 3. The highest priority need for the sample of women responding is for a day care center for children located conveniently near the campus. Affirmative responses were given by 86 percent of the returns for an orientation program for returning women students who are newly enrolled. Social activities with other similar students were approved by three-quarters of the respondents: social resource center - 76 percent and social get-togethers - 74 percent. A special course for older returning students and a communications skills workshop were tied for fifth ranking, and a life planning workshop placed last with 58 percent favorable.

In the second part of the questionnaire, the women surveyed were asked to comment on their experiences as students and to make suggestions regarding programs or services which might improve that educational experience for them.

Table 3

Interest in Special Course, Facilities, Activities,

or Programs for Returning Women Students

Type of Program	Yes		No		No Response		Rank
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage	
Day-care Center on/near Campus	274	.91	12	.04	15	.05	1
Orientation to Campus (for new students)	261	.86	32	.11	8	.03	2
Social Resource Center	231	.76	50	.17	20	.07	3
Social Get-togethers with other Returning Women Students	223	.74	61	.20	17	.06	4
Special Course for Returning Women Students	193	.64	72	.24	36	.12	5
Communications Skills Workshop	193	.64	23	.08	85	.28	5
Life Planning Workshop	175	.58	35	.12	91	.30	6

In this section, some women noted that social get-togethers should not be restricted to women only, since older single or divorced women would like to meet men of their age and married women would like, on occasion, to involve their husbands in their campus life. For example, these women said:

> "Being single and a mature woman student, I find it hard to find males of reasonable age available for dating and/or discussion."

> "I would like to see more activities in which a husband and wife participate together."

> "In addition to having women get together, it would be good to have mature men once in awhile."

"It's a definite problem, trying to meet others who have had more 'experience' with life than the 18-21 year olds."

A few women expressed negative attitudes toward considering returning women apart from other students. For example:

"I think the mature student should simply join the academic field."

"I feel a growing concern for the segmentation of American society."

One other negative comment concerned a lack of time returning women have for extra programs, since they often have off-campus commitments, too, either at work or at home.

However, the majority of these open-ended comments expressed appreciation and personal need for programming specifically for the returning woman student, of which the following quoted excerpts are typical:

"When I first came to C.S.U., I felt out of it. All the programs seemed to be geared for people who were confused in a way totally different from my confusion. I didn't need to be oriented to the facilities - I needed to know I was not alone. It was a big step coming back to school."

"It is important that you have some of the suggested items from above for older women and/or women away from school for a time, so that they can become oriented and confident that there is a place for them in the academic world and it has not passed them by."

"When I registered at C.S.U. two summers ago, I didn't encounter anyone (on the staff) who realized what a giant step it was for me (as a mother of four school-age children) who hadn't had a formal class in 13 years."

"It's hard for both men and women older students - you feel so out of it because 90 percent of the people on this campus are 10 years younger than you. I wish this program had been started sooner. I've had to muddle through on my own."

"I have found my small attempt at returning to school lonely and sometimes discouraging, but challenging and enjoyable. The challenge plus the personal fulfillment has kept me trying. The above program can only help. Thank you."

"I found C.S.U. to be a very cold and lonely campus for me. I was not aware of the counseling for mature women. I'm sure it would have been extremely beneficial to me and saved me a great deal of time. Women need a great deal of encouragement when they return to school."

Discussion and Conclusions

It may be questioned that a return rate of 30 percent constitutes a valid and reliable sampling of the population. Research in the use of mailed questionnaires reveals that the return rate is usually low for such surveys, possibly as low as 7 percent or as high as 40 percent, unless the target population is particularly motivated to reply, for example, when they are given some reward for responding, or when there are mailed or telephoned follow-ups to encourage responding (Longworth, 1953; Wallace, 1954; Roeher, 1963). Circumstances of this survey did not allow for payment, additional mailings, or follow-up calls. Another explanation for the low return rate lies in the fact that some of the recipients of the mailing were not in the target population. A computer listing of women students over 21 years old was available, since students over 21 were considered to be beyond the four year traditional college attendance pattern. However, many students at the younger end of the over-21 group would not fall into the category of "returning students," being seniors finishing a regular undergraduate course without significant absence from campus, or being graduate students who are continuing a student role they have never left. These students were encouraged in the cover letter accompanying the questionnaire not to respond. Therefore, the number of responses received probably represents an average or better rate of response for a mailed survey questionnaire and is, therefore, as valid as any such surveys.

Most of the returning women students who did respond to this survey would seem to agree with the general descriptions of this new and growing student subpopulation: they feel relatively confident of their academic skills and do not give academic skill-building programs high priority. They do see a need for on- or near-campus day care for pre-school children. They also would like an orientation program especially designed for them when they first re-enter academic life. Most of these women also perceive a need for more help in choosing and training

for a new vocation, corroborating the belief that older women are returning to school to prepare for new careers. They feel they could benefit from workshops to improve social skills and would enjoy participating in social activities with other returning women students. These results are similar to those Brandenburg (1974) obtained on a sample of mature women in continuing education at the City University of New York.

Responding to these diverse needs, the Office of Women's Programs at Colorado State University will pilot and evaluate a workshop for the recurrent woman student in Fall Quarter, 1974, the aim of which is to help newly returning women clarify the personal values and needs which have brought them back to school and to define academic and vocational goals based on these same values and needs. In addition, brief training in communications skills, problem-solving, and decision-making techniques, assertiveness, and systematic relaxation procedures will be offered. A guide to campus and community resources for various kinds of assistance and social activities will also be given. The workshop will also be a setting for meeting other women in similar circumstances, for sharing problems, tactics, and solutions, and for finding social support in the quest for self-fulfillment through new roles. Thus, the workshop will answer some of the needs expressed in Table 3 for orientation, social skill-building, and social contact with peers.

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